

WELLNESS TIPS

MINDFULNESS AND EATING

Do you often find yourself preoccupied or engaged in another activity while eating so that you are not really aware of your meal or consuming your food? Do you find yourself impulsively snacking especially when stressed or anxious? Habits such as these contribute to eating that is not satisfying and an imbalanced diet.

Mindful eating focuses on healthy eating through increased awareness of our eating patterns - what, when, why, and how we eat - and our relationships with food. It is an intentional approach that increases appreciation of food and your meals, and fosters enjoyment of eating.

Mindful eating is based on the principles of mindfulness, defined by Jon Kabat-Zinn as “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally”. It helps you focus your attention on your experiences, cravings, and physical cues when eating.

Because it is a nonjudgmental approach, it is not guilt inducing, does not reinforce a running critical inner commentary on our food choices, and does not view food choices as a reward or punishment.

Mindful eating is about a healthy lifestyle and not about going on a diet, although some people experience a weight change as their eating patterns change. This contrasts from eating on autopilot, counting calories, and worrying about your diet, but rather creating a positive and enjoyable relationship with food and appreciating the food you consume. Research has shown a positive relationship between mindful eating and healthy eating, with decreased impulsivity, decreased calories, and healthier snacking as people intentionally choose their food.

WHAT IS MINDFUL EATING?

- It focuses on the present moment.
- It includes acknowledging and accepting your feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations.
- The goal is not to change what we eat (although you might and it can lead to different food choices), but rather to change thinking around food.
- It is attentive to your experiences, cravings, and physical cues when eating.

HOW TO BEGIN TO PRACTICE MINDFUL EATING?

1. **Don't skip meals.**

When you are overly hungry, it is more difficult to slow down and pay attention. Plan your meal and when you are going to eat.

2. **Pay attention to your body's signals.**

Are you physically hungry? Are feelings of stress, sadness, loneliness, or boredom triggers for emotional hunger? Are you responding to your environment and its food-related cues (such as a restaurant or smell of BBQ)? As a child did you learn to ignore your body's signals because of expectations that you eat everything on your plate or judgments about the amount of food you ate? If you are not physically hungry, learn how you can address your other needs in a different healthy way instead of with food.

3. **Decrease distractions.**

Turn off the TV/silence your devices. Do not wander around while snacking or eating a meal. Put your food on a plate or bowl and sit down to eat. These will help you tune in to your body's signals and focus on and enjoy your meal.

4. **Take a minute to pause and clear your head before beginning to eat.**

This helps you become centered and to appreciate the food (and people you are eating with, if present). Expressing gratitude also helps you become more centered.

5. **Pay attention to your senses.**

Notice the appearance/color, texture, aroma, different sounds as you prepare and eat your food. Think about the five basic tastes: Sour, salty, sweet, bitter, umami (savory, meats, broth, cheese). Some foods have more than one basic taste.

Take small bites; it is easier to taste if your mouth is not too full.

6. **Eat slowly.**

Savor each bite. Put down your fork between bites. Remember it takes 20 minutes for your body to signal it is full. If you eat too rapidly, your body has not had time to communicate it is full, which leads to overeating.

7. **What is your motivation?**

We all have a different relationship with, and different needs for, food. Becoming aware of our individual needs, motivations and thoughts that influence our food choices and patterns supports making food decisions that are right for us.

8. **Learn to recognize what your body needs.**

How hungry am I? Am I hungry or thirsty? How do I feel after eating half my meal? Is this enough or too much?

9. **Eat to maintain health and well-being.**

Becoming mindful takes practice and learning the skill is most effective when it becomes a part of your regular routine. Core to mindfulness is the idea of acceptance – noticing what happens without judging it and without having a preconceived outcome to achieve. Some people may apply these principles in a more informal way, such as with the tips included today. Others may decide to pursue more formal learning about mindfulness such as the Mindfulness Based Stress Management program offered at UIHC.

Slowing down, listening to our bodies, doing one thing at a time, creating small rituals, and considering what went into our meal creates a healthier relationship with food and more satisfying eating experience, whether it is a large meal, a snack or a treat.

It is a long-term approach to eating without restrictions and having a healthy relationship with food that is satisfying and enjoyable.

Ackerman, C.E. "58 Science-Based Mindful Eating Exercises and Tips." PositivePsychology.com. December 10, 2020.

This article discusses research results; cites mindful exercises, worksheets and questionnaires; describes mindful eating challenges; identifies several mindful eating apps, YouTube and TedTalk Videos, podcasts, and books/workbooks; and has a long list of tips.

<https://positivepsychology.com/mindful-eating-exercises/>

Diabetes Spectrum (ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). "Mindful Eating: The Art of Presence While You Eat." 30(3):171-174. August 2017.

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Harvard Health. "8 Steps to Mindful Eating." January 2016.

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Headspace.com. "Mindful Eating."

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Kabat-Zinn, J. "Full Catastrophe Living." New York, Dell Publishing. 1991.

Willard, C. "6 Ways to Practice Mindful Eating." January 17, 2019.

<https://www.mindful.org/6-ways-practice-mindful-eating/>

Check the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips <https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

Feel free to contact the MSCC to talk with a counselor or schedule an appointment for questions and concerns.

Stay safe and stay well!

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